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TAGS: PGOV PREL VE
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S VISIT TO LARA STATE

Classified By: Stephen McFarland, Deputy Chief of Mission for 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) The Ambassador visited Barquisimeto in Lara state 14-15 July to inaugurate the first American Corner and Virtual Presence Post in Venezuela, visit social programs, and meet with local business executives, media outlets, religious leaders, and a Venezuelan baseball hero. Politicians from President Hugo Chavez's Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) party declined to meet with the Ambassador. The visit, however, achieved its public diplomacy objectives to establish a direct virtual connection with the U.S. Embassy, exploring possibilities of further cooperation with local businesses, and supporting church- and business-supported social programs. End summary.

AMERICAN CORNER AND VIRTUAL PRESENCE POST

12. (U) The Ambassador opened the first American Corner and the first Virtual Presence Post in Venezuela at the Bar Association library in Barquisimeto, Lara State on 15 July. The American Corner provides the public a physical area with computer terminals, information and materials that are accessible at U.S. Embassies. The Virtual Presence Post offers remote internet access to a U.S. Embassy, including a live web chat with Embassy personnel. The Ambassador signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Dr. Henry Alviarez, president of the Bar Association. In their public remarks, the Ambassador and the Bar Association's treasurer hailed the American Corner as an important step toward improved people-to-people relations. The treasurer sent the first message to Embassy Caracas via the Virtual Presence Post live web chat. He received a rapid response from a Consular officer in Caracas. The event, attended by approximately 60 people, received extensive coverage from both local and national media.

THE CHURCH

13. (C) Archbishop Tulio Manuel Chirivella Valera, who served through much of the 1990's as president of the Venezuelan Episcopal (Bishops') Conference (CEV), asked to meet with the Ambassador one-on-one in his office for a candid conversation on President Hugo Chavez. Chirivella described Chavez as a serious, long-term problem for Venezuela. During his 1998 presidential campaign, Chavez sought and received three meetings with then-CEV president Chirivella. Chirivella said he told Chavez then that the Church would support his campaign to help the poor but would oppose non-democratic tendencies. Since his election, Chirivella noted, Chavez has not sought another meeting with him, although they crossed paths again in April 2002, when Chirivella facilitated his departure from Caracas during the brief coup. Asked about the USG position on Chavez, the Ambassador said our approach would be to support remaining democratic institutions in Venezuela, maintain some sort of dialogue with the GOV, and penetrate the poor communities with an alternative message. The Ambassador added he hoped to be able to provide USG support for Church social programs in such communities. Chirivella welcomed financial or rhetorical support by the Embassy and promised to spread the word widely among his fellow prelates. He emphasized that the best way to counter Chavez was to deliver a positive message to poor communities, which constitute 90% of Chavez's political base of support.

CHILDREN'S CENTER, HOMES, SCHOOL

14. (C) The Ambassador visited four social programs to publicize USAID and Church contributions and to support business and Church social services in the local community.

The Ambassador first shared a message of hope for the kids at

the Caritas Children's Cancer Center, recounting the dedication and accomplishments of Lance Armstrong. The Caritas Center, which supports low-income children and youth while they are being treated for their illnesses, is the only center of its kind in Lara. The visit received extensive press coverage. The Ambassador next visited the Church-supported Fe y Alegria school and Divina Pastora home for poor, orphaned, and abandoned boys. Both institutions are located in Barrio Bolivar, which receives aid from the Barrio Adentro program. At the Fe y Alegria school, the Ambassador greeted over a hundred students, under the watchful eyes of more than 10 National Guard, who claimed protection was necessary in the dangerous neighborhood. Turning to the private sector's social programs, the Ambassador visited the Pequeno Cottolengo "Don Orione," a special education facility funded by Procter & Gamble. Procter & Gamble presented their corporate social responsibility agenda, which includes educational, environmental, and other charitable projects.

BUSINESS

15. (C) The Ambassador addressed business leaders on 14 July, explaining he had come to Lara to learn more about the area's possibilities for investment and cooperation and to offer U.S. support as an ally to business. He met with roughly 25 business leaders at PROINLARA, an investment-promotion civil association. At a VENAMCHAM luncheon the Ambassador remarked that VENAMCHAM is the United States's primary partner in the Venezuelan private sector. Emphasizing the importance of corporate social responsibility, the Ambassador offered support to help publicize the business community's efforts in providing social services. The Ambassador touched on similar themes at Procter & Gamble's plant in Barquisimeto. The plant, which has the largest warehouse in the country, employs nearly 600 P&G employees and contractors.

UNIVERSITY

16. (U) The Ambassador called on Maria del Pilar Alonso, academic vice-rector at Yacambu University, a private university specializing in science, technology, and humanities, with approximately 8,000 graduate and undergraduate students enrolled. At Yacambu, the Ambassador pitched the Fulbright Program, including the Faculty Development scholarships available. He also offered support for English language instruction at the university. Alonso expressed some regret that the American Corner was not located in the University library, and enthusiasm for more engagement with the USG.

BASEBALL

17. (C) The Ambassador met with Luis Aparicio on 14 July, the only Venezuelan Hall-of-Famer, and Los Cardenalitos, the little league team sponsored by the Cardenales of Lara professional baseball team, who will face Mexico this summer to compete for the Little League World Series. Amidst extensive press coverage the Ambassador recounted childhood memories of receiving a lefty mitt with Aparicio's signature. The Ambassador also met Umberto Oroeza, the general manager of the Cardenales. Oroeza shared plans to build a facility of nine baseball academies and mentioned the upcoming off-season baseball games the Venezuelan team would be playing in Florida. The Ambassador offered to provide publicity for the games.

MEDIA

18. (C) El Impulso, an opposition newspaper, interviewed the Ambassador on 14 July. The Ambassador fielded questions about U.S.-Venezuelan bilateral relations, Iraq, the U.S. democratic model, Sumate, the U.S. position on left-leaning leaders in Latin America, alleged plans for U.S invasion, oil prices, and baseball. He stated that the U.S. and Venezuela should acknowledge their differences and focus on issues of common interest, such as the war on drugs, energy, and terrorism. The Ambassador defended the U.S.'s absolute right to protect its democratic system against drugs and weapons of mass destruction while dismissing theories about U.S. invasion plans. He noted that while there are various forms of democracies, the system must allow the people to express their opinion. Asked how Venezuelans can be expected to express their opinion when the system is not fair and transparent, the Ambassador noted the important role of international organizations. During an interview at the

opposition-leaning newspaper El Informador, the Ambassador recapped his purposes for visiting Barquisimeto. He stressed the role of companies as the growth engines of the state and emphasized the importance of maintaining investor confidence.

19. (C) At Promar Television, an opposition-leaning station that broadcasts throughout the states of Lara, Barinas, Portuguesa, and Yaracuy, the Ambassador spoke briefly with the station president about Governor Luis Reyes Reyes's mixed record of governance. The station also recorded an interview with the Ambassador to be aired on 18 July, which focused on the American Corner and Virtual Presence Post and the services that it will offer.

COMMENT

10. (C) The Ambassador reached out to Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) politicians Governor Luis Reyes Reyes and Barquisimeto Mayor Henri Falcon, but both declined to meet the Ambassador, saying they would be out of town. AD Deputy Pedro Pablo Alcantara, however, showed up at all but four meetings, invited or not. The press was robust but not aggressive Questions at the Stadium and American Corner inauguration were restricted to sports and the American Corner, respectively.
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